Louise Talma: A Life in Composition [book review]

By: Sarah Dorsey

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Abstract:

***Louise Talma: A Life in Composition*. By Kendra Preston Leonard. Farnham, Surrey, Eng.: Ashgate, 2014. [xii, 263 p. ISBN 9781472416438 (hardcover); ISBN 9781472416445, 9781472416452 (e-book), $109.95.] Music examples, appendix, bibliography, discography, index.**

It is high time for a book about Louise Talma (1906–1996), the pioneering American composer, pianist, and pedagogue. Talma remains one of our foremost American composers of the twentieth century. Hers is a story that could easily have been lost, but Kendra Preston Leonard has given us an important first in bringing Talma's tale to the world with *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition*.

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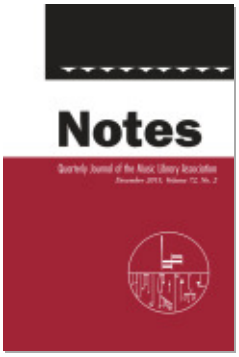
Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Louise Talma: A Life in Composition by Kendra Preston Leonard (review)



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BOOK REVIEWS

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COMPOSERS

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It is high time for a book about Louise Talma (1906–1996), the pioneering American composer, pianist, and pedagogue. Talma remains one of our foremost American composers of the twentieth century. Hers is a story that could easily have been lost, but Kendra Preston Leonard has given us an important first in bringing Talma's tale to the world with *Louise Talma: A Life in Composition*.

Not only was Talma the second female composer (after Ruth Crawford Seeger in 1930) to win a Guggenheim Fellowship, she was also the first female composer to receive two of them consecutively (1946–47), after scores of male composers had received two or even three since the first awards were given in 1925. For years, Talma spent summers studying with the famous French pedagogue Nadia Boulanger; she was the first American to teach with Boulanger at the Conservatoire Américain in Fontainebleau. She was also the first female composer to be invited to join the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1974, thirteen years after receiving an award from them for her three-act grand opera, *The Alcestiad*, written on a libretto by Thornton Wilder). Throughout her life, she received numerous awards and fellowships for composing, and she taught at Hunter College for over fifty years. When not teaching, she spent most of her time composing at artists' colonies such as the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (VCCA), and others.

In her introduction, Leonard presents the analytical approaches used in the eight chapters that follow: music analysis, feminist theory, queer theory, and women's autobiographical theory. All but the last are briefly mentioned, while the author spends more than five pages explicating and delineating women's autobiographical theory. This theory is rich and reveals much about Talma through examination of her music. Leonard presents Talma's life chronologically from "Myth and Meaning in Talma's Early Life and Career" to "Final Works and Afterlife." In each chapter, Leonard presents pertinent musical pieces, digging more deeply into selected works while interweaving the facts of Talma's life with elaboration on the above theories.

One of the strengths of this book lies in the music analysis. Somewhat like a fish riding a bicycle, writing about music can be awkward. Leonard rises to the occasion, making readers wish they could hear the pieces she parses. We are provided with a discography, but unfortunately there is no way to listen to the music. Photographs are also absent from the text. Despite these omissions, Leonard's patience with the analytical process creates a result that is commendable, with music examples that support her investigations. In particular, her parsing of Talma's Piano Sonata no. 1—dedicated to "Mrs. Edward MacDowell"—is beautifully detailed. Presenting the first movement as a set of "non-traditional" variations makes sense and echoes several works Talma wrote during that time.

For all of its strengths and importance, this book contains a number of questionable assumptions put forward with little or no evidence. Leonard posits that an operation mentioned by Talma in a letter from 1935 was a hysterectomy (p. 66). However, existing datebooks available at the Library

of Congress in the Louise Talma Papers (and listed in the finding aid as "Date books and address books, 1925–1990") show that Talma often recorded the dates and intensity of her menstrual periods, which clearly would not have occurred after a hysterectomy.

There is also an odd category found in the handy—yet now already outdated—works list appendix: "Nonexistent Works" (though there is just one listed). Leonard states, "The *Mass for the Sundays of the Year* . . . appeared in previous works listings created by Talma but is missing, and there are no indications of sketches or other materials related to it, calling its entire existence into doubt. While Talma may have provided the title as a projected work, it seems never to have been begun" (p. 234). This is a peculiar assertion: why not just call it "missing" as she does with other pieces? This small point is of particular importance because this "nonexistent work" was found in one of the twelve boxes discovered in remote storage at the Library of Congress in the summer of 2014. Unfortunately this discovery came too late to be included in Leonard's book, but it does vindicate Talma from this implication of a false claim on her works list.

These concerns can be explained as incomplete research or incorrect assumptions, but a more serious problem exists. Using mostly letters to Thornton Wilder in 1958 (while they were working on their opera), Leonard states that Talma was "not exactly the outdoorsy type" (p. 203) by showing her anxiety during her two months in California at the Huntington Hartford artists' colony. In these letters, she portrays Talma's "discomfort with the environment" (p. 204).

In the Talma chapter of her book *Music and the Skillful Listener: American Women Compose the Natural World*, however, scholar Denise von Glahn portrays a composer deeply attuned to nature ([Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013], 69–128). Her connection to the setting of the MacDowell Colony is witnessed in countless works—not only in the sketches of pieces, but in the tone rows, melodies and text choices as well. Leonard does mention nature as being part of her music, but seems to miss the tapestry of Talma's appreciation of the natural world in many of her pieces, from her very first to her very last, like a theme running through her life and work. She mentions von Glahn's book in a footnote, but does not address her disagreement with it in any detail.

Further evidence of Talma's connection to nature lies in the only piece for which she also wrote the text: her chamber opera, *Have You Heard? Do You Know?* Finished in 1979, this piece gave, as its main premise, escape into nature as part of the answer for the modern world's angst. In a letter from 1974 to the National Endowment for the Arts (which funded this piece), Talma wrote, "[this project is] to give voice to the longing felt by everyone to get away from the noise, dirt, crowds, confusion, rush, pollution, crime that presently exist everywhere to a saner way of life. I intend to do this in the comic vein with undertones of seriousness which will, I hope, convey the idea that this must be accomplished if we are to survive" (Louise Talma, letter to James D. Ireland (NEA) [11 August 1974] Louise Talma Papers, Music Division, Library of Congress).

In a central aria of this work, Talma wrote, "I want a quiet place far away, near a flowing brook and a wood, where I can watch the clouds go by, or look at stars the whole night through, and hear the birds sing at dawn. I want to go to that silent place in the woods where the goldenrod plumes in the sun, and the trees are aflame in the fall, and the lilac blooms in the spring, and birches stand slim and white like sentinels in the night" (Talma, "*Have You Heard? Do You Know?* 1975–1980," Boxes 3 and 4, Louise Talma Papers).

Talma's early childhood in the French countryside, as well as the contrast between Manhattan—her home for virtually all of her life—and her various countrified residencies (in addition to MacDowell, Yaddo, VCCA, etc.), were enough to convince Talma of the importance of exposure to and the survival of the natural world. Several of her works over the course of eight decades portray the natural world or use texts depicting nature, including: *The Ambient Air* (1983), *Have You Heard? Do You Know?* (1975–80), *Invocation to the Rain* (1925), *The Lengthening Shadows* (1991–92), *Let's Touch the Sky* (1952), *Pastoral Prelude* (1949), *Pied Beauty* (1946), *Rain Song* (1973), *Summer Sounds* (1969–73), *Terre de France* (1945), and *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* (two settings, 1938 and 1979).

But most (if not all) of Leonard's "evidence" of Talma's distaste for nature comes only from 1958. Talma lived until 1996. Things changed. Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the environmental movement was born. Talma, who read both the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* voraciously, would have been keenly aware of what science was discovering about mankind's negative impact on the natural world. But Leonard never returns to this topic. Talma may not have been out daily, hiking the mountains close to MacDowell, but she did swim in the nearby ponds and took walks around the grounds collecting the colorful fall leaves she sent to friends and kept for herself. And in the 1980s when she had money to contribute, Talma, not a spendthrift by any means, was donating to almost every environmental organization in existence at the time. This was not a casual concern for her; it is an essential key to understanding Talma and her awareness of the world around her.

Although Leonard's portrayal of Talma is missing some archival details and evidence, her book is certainly recommended for its historical importance. Clearly it is Talma's time, and Leonard's book should inspire a flurry of interest that will bring Talma's music back to the concert halls. This text is strongly recommended for music library collections.

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Political Beethoven. By Nicholas Mathew. (New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. [xvii, 273 p. ISBN 9781107005891 (hardcover), $104.99; ISBN 9781139603188 (e-book), $84.] Music examples, illustrations, appendix, bibliographic references, index.

Ludwig van Beethoven's occasional works have long been the subject of derision, passed off as somehow beneath the composer–genius of such timeless works as the "Eroica" and Ninth symphonies. Nicholas Mathew's *Political Beethoven* seeks to change our view of these maligned pieces and of the composer himself, noting that the "book's primary task is to explore the ideological, musical, and psycho-social mechanisms that have allowed Beethoven's music to collaborate with a succession of new historical actors—how it has perpetually lent itself to the next political context, from the nineteenth century until today" (p. 13).

Mathew challenges the reader to explore these works, as well as a number of more canonical compositions, through the lens of post-Napoleonic Vienna. Chief among the works explored are those associated with the festivities surrounding the 1814 Congress of Vienna, including *Wellingtons Sieg* (op. 91), *Der glorreiche Augenblick* (op. 136), and the 1814 version of *Fidelio* (op. 72). It is refreshing that Mathew neither apologizes for nor denigrates this music, instead contextualizing their often-described shortcomings through comparison with other works from the period. His inclusion of critical voices, both contemporary to Beethoven and recent, helps reveal additional layers of meaning.

The book's introduction sets the author's premise, namely, that Beethoven's biographers have sought to describe the composer's political works as anomalies, written for particular occasions and not up to his usual standards. As Mathew demonstrates through the ensuing chapters, Beethoven wrote political and occasional works during his entire career, from early cantatas commemorating the death of Joseph II (WoO 87) and the succession of Leopold II (WoO 88), the Congress of Vienna works, incidental music (*Egmont*, *The Ruins of Athens*), a piano sonata (op. 81a, "Les adieux"), symphonies (3, 6, 7, and 9), and choral works (Ninth Symphony, Choral Fantasy, and *Missa Solemnis*). Taking issue with the notion of Beethoven as isolated from Viennese society, Mathew notes "the evidence indicates simply that Beethoven's voice is plural. He adapted it to changing circumstances and musical genres and, even within single works, echoed the many voices of those around him" (p. 7). The notion of "Beethoven as collaborator" is referred to throughout the volume.

Chapter 1 ("Music between myth and history") explores the concept of "heroic" in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century music. Musical architecture, especially in the guise of sonata form, is seen by many as the key to Beethoven's "insulation against the contamination of history"